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A CAUTION TO YOUNG PERSONS AGAINST
INFIDELITY.

A S E R M O N,
PREACHED
IN THE UNITARIAN CHAPEL,
IN ESSEX-STREET, LONDON;
SUNDAY, APRIL III, MDCCXCVI.

BY JOHN DISNEY, D.D. F.S.A.
THE SECOND EDITION.

L O N D O N :

PRINTED FOR J. JOHNSON, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH-YARD.

MDCCXCVI.

A CAUTION TO YOUNG PERSONS AGAINST
IMPRUDENCE

A. S. E. M. O. N.

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IN THE UNITARIAN CHURCH

IN ESSEX STREET, LONDON

SUNDAY, APRIL 11, 1854

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S E R M O N.

I CHRONICLES, XXVIII, 9.

AND THOU, SOLOMON, MY SON, KNOW THOU
THE GOD OF THY FATHER, AND SERVE
HIM WITH A PERFECT HEART, AND WITH
A WILLING MIND.

As soon as David understood the divine designation of Solomon to succeed him in the government of the kingdom of Israel, and the promise of the continuance of it in his family so long as they should observe all the commandments and judgments of Jehovah, he instantly, as our context tells us, 'in the sight of ' all Israel, the congregation of the Lord, and ' in the audience of our God,' exhorted him, with all the piety of a devout mind, and all

the ardor of parental affection, to ‘ keep, and
 ‘ seek for, all the commandments of the Lord
 ‘ his God: that he might possess that good
 ‘ land, and leave it for an inheritance for his
 ‘ children after him for ever.’* David then pro-
 ceeded, if possible, in more specific language to
 add—‘ and thou, Solomon, my son, know
 ‘ thou the God of thy father, and serve him
 ‘ with a perfect heart, and with a willing mind:
 ‘ for the Lord searcheth all hearts and under-
 ‘ standeth all the imaginations of the thoughts:
 ‘ if thou seek him, he will be found of thee;
 ‘ but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off
 ‘ for ever.’†

The consideration of Solomon’s succession to the kingdom of his father was no otherwise the peculiar motive for David’s exhortation to his son to cultivate a spirit of true religion and piety, than as a debt of gratitude due to the giver of all good. For we can no more confine to the small circle of princes the obligation of grateful obedience to the giver of every thing we are, or possess, than we need to envy their situation. The endowment of reason, and the subsequent revelation of the will of God, are not

* 1 Chron. xxviii. 8. † ver. 9.

not only the greatest, but the common boon of christendom. The distinctions of society are the creatures of man's organization; but I hesitate not to say, they are founded in the nature of things, and in wisdom, and result from causes which, generally speaking, our deliberate judgment will approve.

But, the distinctions of society apart, we are all equally bound to make a grateful return for the voluntary bounty of the wise disposer of all events; for the principle of his munificence is equal, though the apparent measure of it may not. I say the apparent measure of it, for how often does the peasant excel in holiness and virtue his superiors in the world's estimation? how often do his real enjoyments exceed the much boasted enjoyments of the rich, and the reputed fortunate?

The object of David's exhortation was nothing more than what is the natural desire of every religious and affectionate parent, that his children may be truly religious characters, and that, being such, they may enjoy their family's property and possessions, if they have any, and transmit them to their posterity.

But the primary consideration is the religious character of our children; the second, is their prosperity in the world, in which term is included their usefulness in their generation to the rest of mankind.

It is one of the aphorisms of this same Solomon, ‘ Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck, write them upon the table of thine heart, so shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man.’* And, elsewhere, ‘ Remember thy creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.†

The apostle John, in his second epistle, breaks out with exultation on finding some of the children of the chosen lady, to whom the epistle is inscribed, ‘ walking in the truth, according to a commandment received from the father.’‡ And the apostle Paul charged Titus§ to ‘ exhort young men to be sober-minded,’ that is ‘ discreet’ according to the margin

* Prov. iii. 3 and 4.

† 2 John 4.

† Eccles. xii. 1.

§ Titus ii. 6.

margin of our bibles, or as others read it,
' chaste.'

In a word, scripture-authorities might be multiplied and extended without end in the recommendation and injunction of religion and morality upon all, who call themselves the servants of God, and the disciples of Christ.

But of the credibility of all these authorities the sceptic doubts, and the unbeliever protests against them: and both unite to invite the young man, while yet his reason is immatured and his passions are predominant, to adopt the plausible modesty of scepticism, which promises so easy a transition to infidelity, first with respect to revelation, and afterwards to the existence of a first cause. Flattering as this self-sufficiency may be to the pride of man, it deprives him of the beneficial use of his reason, and robs him of his best privilege; it requires his belief in the greater miracle, that the records of revelation are forgeries, the history of it an imposition, and all the combined wisdom and intellect of the best and greatest characters the world has known have been duped by the fraud for seventeen hundred years. It also leaves the harmonious system of the universe, and the beautiful

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correspondence

correspondence of the parts of this world to each other, to have been formed without design or end.

One of the sources of infidelity is a profligate life. A very general one also has been the establishment of certain irreconcilable and contradictory dogmas of religious faith. But it has, of late years, spread among a description of people, of whom it cannot be said that they are included under either character. And yet to impute to rational notions of the christian religion any tendency, either directly or remotely, to promote infidelity is greatly to wrong our faith. But if men will wantonly meddle with fire, it is no wonder that their hands should be burned. And if they will indulge in seducing levities, and proceed in them from small degrees to greater; if they feel in themselves an irksomeness under the gentle restraint of the laws of religion and virtue, and, rather than comply, will give into idle and frivolous objections of men, who are more captious than ingenuous, of men whose talents partake more of subtile wit than sound judgment; they must abide the consequences. Like the rolling stone they will be precipitated down the declivity, which they will ascend no more.

From

From what cause, or what combination of causes, young men, otherwise virtuous, become unbelievers, it is very difficult to say with precision. A misapprehension of the nature of historical evidence, and a reluctance to allow a progression of revelation to an all-wise and all-powerful being, are probably among the number. In other words, they are indisposed to let even deity itself do what it will with its own. They not only will try their reason as far as it will serve them, in which they certainly do well; but because it fails them from its insufficiency to scrutinize infinite wisdom, they resist conclusions which humble their false pride, not by contradictions in the dispensation, but by their depth and extent. For it should seem perfectly agreeable to reason, that the creator should be wiser, better, and more perfect than the creature; that the former of every thing should, in all respects, be greater than the thing formed. It would, indeed, be a contradiction in terms, if a finite being could fully comprehend an infinite one, or if man, who is a creature of yesterday, could fully comprehend God, who hath existed from eternity. It is even impossible, in the highest phrenzy of human pride, to imagine ourselves equal with God, and yet some men arraign the wisdom,

and distrust the providence of that same God, the very instant that his plan appears not to be reducible to their limited conceptions. The observation, or, more properly, the argument of the apostle Paul remains as conclusive now as when he wrote it, and neither the wit, nor the wisdom of the most acute or subtle sceptics will be able to avoid, or answer it. 'O! man, ' who art thou that disputest with God? Shall ' the work say to the workman, why didst thou ' make me thus? Hath not then the potter" such ' power over the clay,' as ' to make out ' of the same lump one vessel for honourable' uses, ' and another for dishonourable?'"

Whether the fancies of young persons of our day are more fertile, or their follies more daring than those of the preceding generations, we will not take upon ourselves to determine. Most probably, both they and their predecessors are on an equality in these respects. And yet it appears to be a very prevailing fashion, for the youth of our time, to be unwilling, to say the least, to resign the palm of forwardness. It is, however, the less impeachment of the truth of christianity, when it is rejected by the immatured judgment of youth, though such rejection

* Rom. ix. 20, 21.

rejection may be more fatal, on that very account, to the individual. Their early and impartial inquiry is greatly to be commended; and their examining the evidences, while they endeavour to practise the moral precepts, of christianity, is a conduct worthy of the natural ingenuousness and goodness of youth. But a precipitate judgment must be a premature one; and a premature one will lay the foundation of a prejudice fatal to an honest verdict.

Let then the importance of the question suspend your decision, in deference, if you please, to the opinion of others, but, really, in justice to yourselves. For virtue, of which you generally make honourable mention, is, beyond all doubt, better secured by the further authority and enlarged views of revelation, than it can be without these auxiliaries. And, consequently, supposing you should not, in more advanced age, be persuaded of the truth of the christian religion, your moral character will have sustained no injury from the suspension: and, if your inquiry should close with the conviction of its truth, you will have cause to be thankful, that the foundation of your virtue here, and of your hopes and expectations hereafter is laid upon

upon a rock, which scepticism and infidelity have assailed in vain.

We contemplate the being and providence of God in the survey of all nature :—if we look up to the heavens, he is there ; if we cast our eyes upon the face of the earth, or the seas, or search into the interior parts of either, he is there also : nevertheless, nature, as well as revelation, presents to us subjects of difficulty ; and, let us contemplate and admire its works as long and as accurately as we will, we are not capable of comprehending any part of their beauties, and consequently not capable of understanding God fully as he is.

But are we, therefore, to disbelieve the existence of God, dispute his power, or impeach his wisdom and goodness ? Surely, the positive and demonstrative evidence we have that he exists, and that he is powerful, wise, and good, is sufficient to entitle him to the further acknowledgment that he is infinite and perfect in all these, and that his attributes and dispensations are no further cognizable before men, than he hath been pleased to make them level to their capacity. Even the want of universality in these communications

is as necessary an appendage to them, as the comprehension of the whole of them is superior to the most improved intellect and conceptions of man. One age, one nation, one man will exceed another age, another nation, another man, in every possible knowledge or attainment. Even the same man will increase his knowledge with increased years, yet, in this respect, as the tree falleth so it must lie, for there is 'no knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, whither we are going.* But infinite justice will interpose, and rectify all these apparent irregularities in a future world of endless progression of happiness; for, according to the use made of the talents we possess, we shall be judged; according as we shall have sowed, so shall we finally reap.

If then we 'know the God of our fathers,' (and we all may know as much of him as human intellect will enable the most learned man to know,) the language of David is but the echo of our best and most improved reason and judgment. To serve the God whom we know is a necessary corollary of such knowledge, and our service will only then be acceptable to him when it is made practically beneficial

* Eccles. ix. 10.

beneficial to ourselves, and is performed with a perfect heart and willing mind. Earnestness and cheerfulness in our duty is not only a recommendation to him to whom the duty is owing, but is at the same time our encouragement and security for performing it.

But before we can serve God acceptably we must know his will. To this end we must consult his law 'written on our hearts, to which 'our conscience bears testimony *;' and his additional declaration of his pleasure in the revelation of his mind by Moses and the prophets, by Christ and his apostles.

But this, says the young disciple of infidelity, is begging the question in dispute, by assuming the credibility of those dispensations which were anticipated by the promulgation of the law of nature, and needless because of its sufficiency.

It would be well if these young men would give themselves leisure to reflect that the measure, time, and mode of communicating God's will belong to himself; that in the moral and religious world, as in the natural and animal world, every thing is progressive; that their expectation of satisfaction can only be answered

by

* Rom. ii. 16.

by a continued standing miracle, which would destroy all testimony, and leave no exertion of the mind to distinguish between truth and falsehood. The very character of rational evidence and scrutiny would be destroyed and lost in the commanding and impulsive effect of such miracle. Every idea of this life being a state of moral and rational probation would be destroyed, and the field for the exercise of the christian temper, which is the ornament and glory of the christian character, would be destroyed. A lifeless uniformity of action, exciting no passion, exercising no faculty of the mind, enjoying no hope beyond the present moment, would reduce man to a machine, and represent his future happiness, if peradventure he should discover it, to be of a very inferior degree, because indeed his capability of enjoying it, would be lessened according to the limited sphere of his voluntary action.

Thus men very little consider the nature, or allow themselves time to estimate the value, of what they possess; and they still less consider the ease and consequence of possessing all that they think they want, or wish to have, according to their own schemes, and on their own terms. And according to their repeated mistakes

mistakes and failures in these respects, proportionably thankful ought we to be that 'the Lord God almighty reigneth.'*

These cautionary observations are particularly addressed to young persons, and are only intended to stay a premature decision against the credibility of the christian revelation, that they may attain a competency of judgment before they peremptorily pronounce upon so important a question. They are intended to correct the pertness of frivolous objections, and to prevent the pertinacity of early prejudice against a system of religion, which appears to be so very favourable to the happiness of man here, by shewing him, more clearly, the means of acquiring, and even of anticipating, the happiness of another world.

All that is now asked of young persons is the suspension of their judgment, in order that they may do justice to themselves, without requiring them to give up one rational or innocent pleasure, in which their years may lead them to partake. Ask these ingenuous youths whether, when they are advanced only a few leagues on their foreign travel, they would presume to
write

* Rev. xix. 6.

write a correct account of the government, laws, manufactures, commerce, naval and military strength of another country, through which they are passing; or, if they should, whether any attention would be given to their judgment or testimony? and, they will tell you, they would not risk or attempt, a communication which would instantly be denounced as founded in incompetence and presumption. No; they would in the first place, crave time, and employ that time in inquiring, examining, reading, considering and re-considering the character of its inhabitants, the constitution of its legislature, the spirit of its laws, the nature and situation of its manufactures and commerce, together with its internal resources and external aids, before they would expect any attention to be given to their opinion.

Now, shall all this inquiry and consideration be necessary in an ordinary report of the political state and situation of any country in the world, and the great question of the credibility of the revelation of the will of God, be determined without thought, without reflection, and be made the object of sportive contempt by boys, or of wit, cavil, or quibble by immatured men?

Human

Human authorities are readily admitted to be of little weight, where serious discussion has had fair play. But when we are told that Newton declared, 'he found more sure marks of authenticity in the Bible, than in any prophane history whatever;' and that Locke hath further assured us, that the 'New Testament had God for its author; salvation for its end; and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter:' we may reasonably expect that a modest deference to such men as these would prevail on ingenuous youth not hastily to decide against their deliberate opinion.

More than this is not required of them, and this concession, which is natural to the uncorrupted sentiments of the young mind, is asked for the sake of the young persons themselves. If our religion be of God, (and we profess to be so persuaded,) all the powers of this world combined together cannot finally overthrow the rational faith of the gospel. We need not, therefore, be alarmed if an army of adventurers were to arise to attack our citadel; but we may be permitted, disinterestedly, so to feel for the temerity of youth, as to caution them against being deluded by futile remarks, or deceived by pretenders to wisdom above what is written.

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